

In his final State of the Union address before facing voters this fall, President Obama offered a populist vision to address the deep inequities in the economy. As many have observed, a number of his themes were familiar, but an increasingly assertive Obama used them to challenge Republican lawmakers to work with him and draw battle lines between himself and the men hoping to oppose him in the general election.

"I thought he talked the common sense that people have been waiting to hear," said NAACP president Benjamin Jealous. "We need to stop rewarding companies that ship jobs overseas; we need to start incentivizing companies to create more jobs here; that it's time for secretaries to not have to pay higher taxes than their bosses."

Several African-American lawmakers were particularly interested in Obama's proposals to help struggling homeowners by allowing them to refinance their mortgages and creating a financial crimes unit at the Justice Department to expand efforts to investigate and prevent the abusive lending practices that led to the housing crisis.

"I expect that fell on happy ears all over the country because so many people are victims no matter where they live. African-Americans and Latinos were targeted by companies selling them exotic mortgages," said Congressional Black Caucus Chairman Emanuel Cleaver (D-Missouri), adding that even the president's "most ardent opponents" should support those proposals.

Rep. Allen West (R-Florida), however, suggested that creating a new DOJ division is hypocritical.

"One minute the president says he wants a more efficient government and to consolidate agencies and now he wants to create another agency," West said. "You can't talk out of both sides of your mouth."

West also objected to a proposal that states force children to stay in school until they graduate or reach age 18.

"Let's look at how we can empower the local school boards. We can't continue to have a federal government that's going to supersede their authority. That's a bridge too far," West said.

But Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-Maryland) said that any efforts to ensure a better-educated workforce are critical, including the president's proposal to increase funding for community colleges, where people who've lost jobs can be retrained for new ones and young adults can get some much-needed remediation.

"All of the research shows that the less education you have, the recession negatively affects you, no matter what color you are," he said. "But I think it affects African-Americans a little more because a lot of the times we're the last hired."

Former White House hopeful Herman Cain delivered the Tea Party response to the president's address. He called it a "a hodgepodge of little ideas" and said there needs to be a revolution at the ballot box.

Each of the Republican presidential candidates has sought to portray Obama as weak in the areas of national security and foreign policy and in the eyes of foreign leaders, a notion he derided in his speech. The president said that anyone "who tells you that America is in decline or that our influence has waned, doesn't know what they're talking about."

Cummings applauded the president for defending his record. "He laid out an excellent case about our strength and needed to do that," Cummings said. "I think he shut them up pretty nicely."

For online story, click [here](#)